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IDEAS IN ACTION

Digital Exclusion: Potential Implications for Social Work Education

Sue Watling

QAA Subject Benchmark 5.9 requires social work students to demonstrate the ability to have a critical understanding of the social impact of ICT, including an awareness of the impact of the 'digital divide'. In the twenty-first century, the implications of digital exclusion may become increasingly relevant for the social work profession with its values of empowerment and anti-oppressive practices. As governments and organisations move closer to the provision of online services, the social worker may find themselves addressing the disempowerment of service users and carers disconnected from a virtual welfare state. The concern is that Benchmark 5.9 does not go far enough, that the full significance of this requirement may not be sufficiently realised and a greater awareness urgently called for.

Keywords: Anti-discriminatory Practice; Technology-assisted Communication; Diversity; Digital Exclusion; Social Exclusion; Disempowerment

QAA Social Work Subject Benchmark 5.9 lists six criteria in ICT and numerical skills which social work graduates must demonstrate. These competencies include effective use of ICT for professional communication and enhancing skills in problem solving and research in practice. In addition to these expectations, there is a requirement that students demonstrate the ability to have a critical understanding of the social impact of ICT, including an awareness of the impact of the 'digital divide' (QAA, 2008, p. 20).

This recognition of the increasing influence of ICT (Information Communication Technologies) in society and potential implications for social work practice is to be welcomed. Not only should it result in students who possess the prerequisite digital

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skills plus awareness of digital inequalities, by default it will also require increased understanding of the implications of digital exclusion from social work educators and practitioners. The concern is the full significance of this requirement has not yet been realised and an even greater awareness may soon be called for. The increasing trend for
45 central and local services to use online provision of information will escalate as the government plans to expand even further into digital access to services (HMG, 2008; Lane Fox, 2010, p. 5). The potential barriers to participation in these new structures of a virtual welfare state may be complex and awareness of their composite nature is currently greatly under-represented in social work education and practice.

50 While the QAA are to be applauded for their recognition of the social impact of ICT, it has to be considered whether or not this benchmark statement goes far enough. Two questions come to mind. First, the need for guidelines on how individual institutions can best achieve parity of resource provision on the subject of digital divides; and second, how best to achieve a critical understanding of the social impact of digital exclusion not only
55 for social work students but for social work staff and practitioners too.

Key to critical awareness of twenty-first century digital technologies is that they are not neutral environments. Whilst opportunities for access to the Internet can be enabled, alongside engagement with an increasing variety of digital media, unless certain conditions are met, the technology that enables access can deny it as well.
60 Social work practitioners, so often on the front line with issues of unequal distribution of resources, may find themselves needing to address the disempowerment of service users and carers who are disconnected from online provision of information and service.

It has already been suggested that dividing lines of digital exclusion are closely
65 aligned to those associated with social exclusion, for example income, age, ethnic minority, location and disability (HMG, 2008). Continued denial of digital access is likely to further disadvantage as 'government and industry expand ever faster into digital-only services' (Lane Fox, 2010, p. 5). For students of professional social work, which encompasses the value base of concern for the 'achievement of greater equality
70 in the allocation of social goods between nations, communities and individuals' (Banks, 2008, p. 34), demonstration of a critical understanding of the social impact of ICT will clearly become even more essential to education and training.

One way to increase awareness of the issues may be to embed wider recognition of the advantages of digital inclusion. Not only is this becoming prerequisite for the
75 social work profession but it is an expanding consideration for the service user and carer as more 'organisations in all sectors are increasingly making the web their primary means of communication and interaction' (Lane Fox, 2010, p. 5). The front line role of social work practice in both the management and challenge of digital inequity is mandatory but the full extent of its digital responsibilities may not yet be
80 fully realised. Subject Benchmark 5.9 is a step in the right direction but may ultimately prove to be too little too late.

One problem with the QAA benchmark statement is its reference to a single digital divide. This fails to adequately convey the complex and structural nature of digital exclusion in the twenty-first century where:

... the positions people have in social and media networks determine their potential power. As the importance of the media networks created by computers and their networks increases ... having no position in these networks, or a marginal one, entails social exclusion. (Van Dijk, 2006, p. 231)

85 The potential significance for social work education and practice of this digital marginalisation requires urgent attention. The QAA benchmark might be more effective if, rather than critical awareness of the 'digital divide', it referred to a critical analysis of exclusive digital practices. Viewing digital exclusion through the lens of social oppression, where structures of inequality are replicated and reinforced through
90 underlying discursive practices of disempowerment, and uneven redistribution of resources, would support relocation of this new category of social inequity into the curriculum with established learning outcomes and assessment criteria. The subject's relevance to theories of social justice make it an appropriate addition across a number of modules; for example 'Values, Ethics and Equality' with its focus on anti-oppressive
95 practices or 'Contemporary Policy and Society' based on social exclusion and the generation of inequality. However, the closest fit may be 'Service User and Carer Participation' which links to core professional social work values of individual respect, support for self-determination and the empowerment of the individual. Where the service user is the expert, incorporation of their lived experiences of barriers both
100 highlights and challenges existing understandings. In particular this could be effectively used to demonstrate the diverse nature of digital divides. Social work has a role in confronting new twenty-first century forms of oppression; for example, how participation in the public sphere is denied to the digitally excluded through an increasing use of digital-only platforms for decisions, discussion and debate.

105 The experience of the service user is mostly absent from existing research on digital divides and social work. Issues of access are addressed for students, staff and practitioners but to date the lived experiences of the service user and carer appear to be largely excluded (Rafferty and Waldman, 2006; Van Dijk, 2006; Waldman and Rafferty,
110 Q2 2008; Steyaert and Gould, 2009). One reason may be that research into digital exclusion often begins from its polar position, i.e. that of digital inclusion. If access is available, and confidence and competence in place, then unless the author has the benefit of lived experience, the parameters of digital exclusion may be harder to identify. As a result, the social roles of ICT are most commonly viewed from positions
115 of privilege where access is established and focus can centre on how best that access can be utilised.

Technology can improve the quality of our lives and learning and can potentially enrich social work practice and education, although noting that achieving gains depends on our active involvement and acknowledging that the technology can also
120 pose challenges and dangers. (Rafferty and Steyaert, 2009)

While this approach is commendable, if the social work profession is to have relevance in contemporary digital society then additional insight into the challenges and dangers is required. The literature suggests that there remains confusion about the complexity of digital divides and a lack of explanations for their persistence and the underlying

social and cultural causes behind inequality of access: ‘The most conspicuous fact is that the digital divide has not been discussed against the background of a general theory of social inequality, other types of inequality, or even a concept of human equality in general’ (Van Dijk, 2006, p. 232). If social work education is to effectively prepare its students for practice, it must seek to equip them with the knowledge and understanding of the dual nature of ICT, how it both enables and disables and how the resulting divisions impact on understandings of self-determination and anti-oppressive practice.

Digital exclusion is common. Its presence can be found in multiple situations including, as already noted, existing categories of social disadvantage and marginalisation. There is a danger that provision of access is seen as the solution when for many service users, access is the point at which the issues of exclusion begin. To operate effectively in a digital society, and participate within the parameters of the new digital environments, in particular the increasing provision of welfare services, three key elements are required. These are access, training and support and reliance on the inclusive design of the digital environments themselves. Each of these requirements has to be appropriated to individual requirements for there is no ‘one size fits all’ answer. However, an effective combination that suits individual needs can have a transformative impact on the enabling of digital engagement and participation.

Experience indicates the usefulness of providing more explicit detail about these elements. Access involves the input and output of data; this may involve assistive hardware such as alternatives to a mouse or keyboard, or software such as text-to-speech, speech-to-text or screen magnification programmes. The example of Stephen Hawkins, whose physical movement is limited by motor neurone disease, demonstrates the power of assistive technology to enable communication and access to information. Social work students should be aware of the range of assistive technology such as scanners, alternative keyboards and Braille displays and some of the issues involved such as availability and cost. Training and support in the use of assistive technology is the next essential; not only for tackling steep learning curves but also because assistive technologies require additional help to set up and troubleshoot problems. While digital inclusion can alleviate separation and loneliness, it can rarely be fully achieved in isolation and ongoing support systems are essential for long term engagement. The broader issues around negative aspects of the Internet must be addressed and users need awareness of the dangers of viruses, scams, phishing and divulging personal data. While the government moves towards online-only services, the media continue to report on the dark side of the Internet, offering mixed messages to new and inexperienced users who will require guidelines for safe practice. Finally, even with all the prerequisites for access in place, if the digital data on the Internet have not been designed with the needs of assistive technologies in mind, then access will continue to be denied. The commercial marketing of assistive ICT, which suggests it can provide all the answers, is quite simply incorrect. Assistive technology takes advantage of the unique quality of digital data which is its flexibility. Unlike the single fixed format of the printed page, digital data can be made available in multiple formats and supports customisation to suit individual requirements. However, maximising

these benefits requires inclusive practice in the design and delivery of the digital environments themselves. In spite of Disability Discrimination legislation (OPSI, 1999, 2005) and Web Accessibility Standards 1.0 and 2.0, the Internet of the twenty-first century is becoming an increasingly inaccessible place. New environments are predominantly designed for a MEE-Model of user who operates using their ‘Mouse’, ‘Eyes’ and ‘Ears’ and alternative modes of access are not adequately catered for. Until these issues are addressed, digital inclusion can never be assumed and as the government moves towards increased online provision of information and services, the implications of exclusive practices for vulnerable and inexperienced users may not yet be fully realised.

Finally, the association of digital exclusion solely with individual impairment should be avoided. The reality of exclusion from digital environments is broader and includes categories of age, location, cultural restrictions and language as well as disability. Nevertheless, the Social Model of Disability (Oliver, 2009), where barriers to access are created through the failure of society to recognise sufficient categories of difference, can be usefully applied to digital exclusion. It is also helpful to remember the social model sought to shift the origin of barriers to participation from the individual to the environment. In the twenty-first century, the technology is fully available for ensuring equity of digital access. The barriers to achieving this originate from the social environment; the social work profession is not only bearing witness to a new category of social exclusion but also to new structures of digital disability.

Shifting the QAA’s emphasis from the social impact of ICT and the digital divide to a focus on exclusive digital practices, and embedding their relevance to practice into the social work curriculum, has a number of advantages. Firstly, their application to social justice theory will enhance understanding of the complex nature and underlying structures of digital divides. Secondly, it will heighten student awareness of the relevant issues concerning alternative access criteria which are critical to inclusive practice. Finally, staff and practitioners will be encouraged to address not only issues of professional practice with ICT but how digital exclusion replicates and reinforces existing oppression and injustice.

The QAA Benchmark 5.9. draws attention to the social impact of ICT but fails to make explicit the relevance of digital divides as new categories of social exclusion, or the future implications of this for social work practice. Referring to a divide rather than multiple divisions implies a singular cause and supports the common interpretation that the solution lies with access. The reality is that digital exclusion is as complex as social exclusion with multiple structured layers that are interwoven into the fabric of society. As such it requires a more in-depth critical analysis than its current position in the benchmarks suggests. In an increasingly digital society, the need for effective understanding of digital exclusion must be highlighted. Incorporating the view from the service-user perspective will open up to students, staff and practitioners its multifarious, dynamic nature. As the government moves even further into the provision of a virtual welfare state, practitioners will need to demonstrate the prerequisite knowledge and skills to challenge exclusive digital practice rather than inadvertently produce it. As it stands, the QAA Benchmark 5.9

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may not be explicit enough to ensure the multiple layers of digital exclusion are fully realised or to ensure the social work profession is adequately equipped for meeting the challenges of a new digital future.

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